

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine

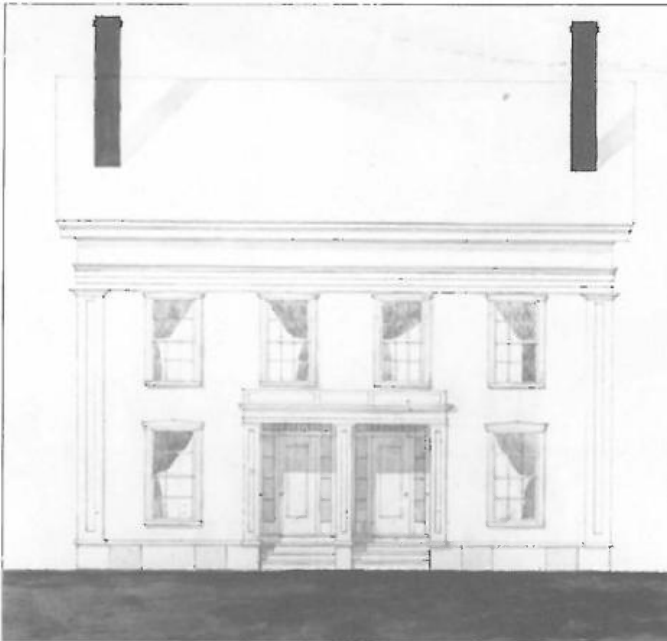


Figure 1. Elevation drawing of Double House by Thomas C. Huntress, 1846 (MHPC).

Thomas C. Huntress 1811-1901

The life of Thomas Chandler Huntress of Parsonsfield was in many ways similar to that of his contemporaries in the small farming towns of northwestern York County. He was born in the town on March 13, 1811 to John, a cordwainer, and Phebe Huntress and spent most of his life on a small farm in the extreme northwest corner of Parsonsfield where it adjoins Freedom, New Hampshire. The sixth of nine children, there is no record of his receiving any formal education during his youth, but it is evident that beyond learning to read and write Huntress later aspired to acquire talents that might have earned him the appellation "architect."

Huntress' mother descended from the Chandler and Russell families of North Yarmouth, and it was to that town that her third son Frederick journeyed to marry Abigail Curtis in 1834. The couple set up housekeeping in Portland, and in the city directory

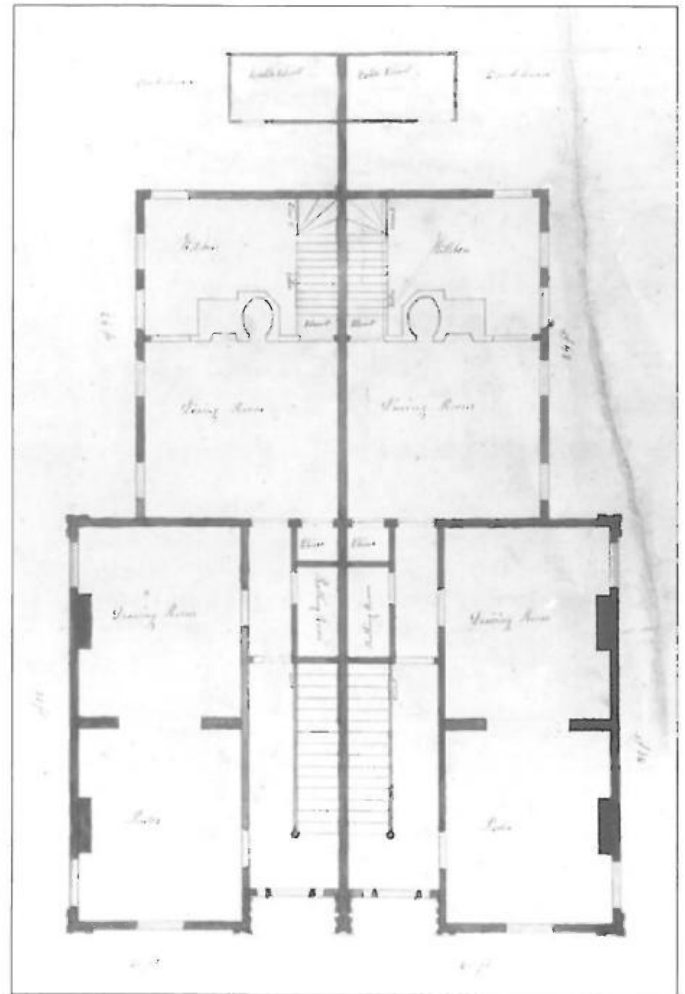


Figure 2. Floor plan of Double House by Thomas C. Huntress, 1846 (MHPC).

for that year Frederick is listed as a mariner at E. M. Plimpton and Company. Thomas, then age twenty-three, followed his brother to the coast and evidently lived with the newly-wedded couple. The same year he is listed as a laborer at the "willow" establishment of Edmund F. Peters.¹ In 1839 the loss of his brother Frederick at sea precipitated changes that propelled Thomas to decisions which ultimately resulted in his return to Parsonsfield. Abigail Huntress moved to Freeport, her address in 1841 when she sold Thomas her interest in the Huntress lands in Parsonsfield, acquired by devise from her late husband.²

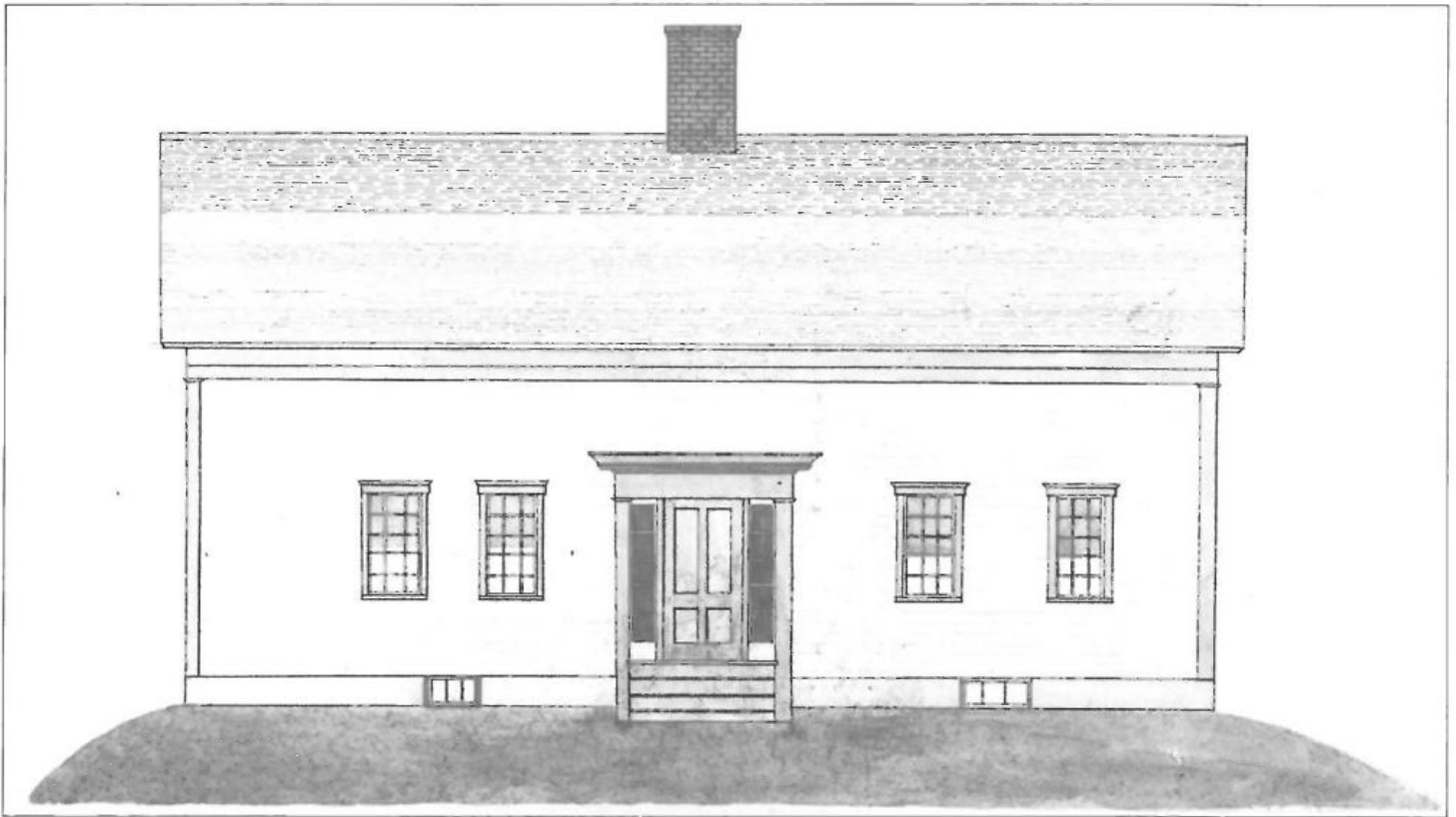


Figure 3. Elevation drawing of the Thomas C. Huntress House, Parsonsfield by Huntress, 1852 (MHPC).

Although he now owned land in his native town, Thomas Huntress remained in Portland until the spring of 1846, employed as a joiner from 1844 on.³ It is probable that it was during this time he was exposed to the building design manuals of the period, for it is on large folio sheets with a watermarked date of 1846 that some of his first known architectural renderings are found. The drawings of two Greek Revival style double houses on raised foundations show a hand experienced at drafting and aware of contemporary design trends in Portland⁴ (Figures 1, 2). The drawings reveal a studied talent in rendering light and shadow combined with a charming naiveté in the depiction of colorful tied-back drapes at the windows that seem to be a hallmark of his known elevational drawings. Certainly this talent seems to have been assiduously developed and consciously pursued. Drafting exercises of the "Tuscan Order" and "Doric Order" proudly signed in calligraphic flourish "T. C. Huntress" are faithful copies of Plate IV in Asher Benjamin's *The Builder's Guide* (1839) and Plate VII (with additional refinement from Plate VIII) of Benjamin's *Elements of Architecture* (1843). Although undated, they appear to be in the same time frame as the Greek Revival double house renderings.⁵

In April, 1846 Huntress returned to Parsonsfield, and a deed executed with his brother James that month lists Thomas as a "yeoman" farmer, an

occupation he was to be cited by in the census of 1850.⁶ However, ten years later census information lists Huntress as a house carpenter and the head of a household that included a wife and four children.⁷

Evidently Huntress continued his practice of joinery and design after he returned to Parsonsfield, although the title of yeoman indicates that he probably derived his primary livelihood from farming. Between land transactions with his sister-in-law Abigail in 1841, his brother James in 1846, and a neighbor named Marquis L. Emery in 1850, he had put together a farm of almost ninety acres. Yet even by the standards of his time and place, this was a small farm, and most of the land he acquired was at best marginal for agrarian pursuits. His marriage and growing family after 1853 would have necessitated an augmented income, and indeed by 1861 Huntress described himself as a "Farmer and Mechanic."⁸

Most of Huntress' surviving drawings apparently date from just prior to his removal from Portland, but their descent in the family show that they were taken to Parsonsfield with him when he moved.⁹ Even during his first years developing the farm, there are indications that his drafting skills were not fully ignored. Using the back of paper watermarked 1846 on which earlier drawings appeared, he drew a scaled representation of the Congregational Church at Fryeburg, built between 1848 and 1850.¹⁰



Figure 4. Thomas C. Huntress House, Parsonsfield, 1990 view (MHPC).

Huntress' single identifiable built work is also his least academically conceived. In 1852, just prior to his marriage, Huntress mortgaged his lands in Parsonsfield to acquire capital with which to build a new house.¹¹ The design for this house shows a modest center chimney Cape that is distinguished mainly by its oddly unbalanced fenestration and simplified Greek Revival detailing at corners, cornice, and central entry (Figures 3, 4, 5). As built the main house follows its intended design quite closely; although the center chimney was moved behind the ridge pole and the asymmetrical spacing of the windows, especially to the left of the front entry, was amplified. The barn is apparently contemporaneous with the house, although the connecting ell was added later in the nineteenth century.¹²

Huntress' house serves as a punctuation point to his career as a designer and carpenter, as no further work by him is known. By the census of 1870 he was again listed as a farmer, with his two sons, aged sixteen and fourteen, assisting on the land. What little is known about him in his later years does not differ greatly from the stories of numerous others who clung to hardscrabble lands as farming declined in the late nineteenth century. A Mason, a Granger, and a respected enough member of the community to serve on the Parsonsfield Centennial Committee in 1885, he was not immune to events far beyond his control. The national depression in 1876-77 hit farmers hard, and Huntress was forced to sell the home farm and buildings to his wife in 1877 in order to retain them.¹³ Ten years later he sold his remaining lands to his son George.¹⁴ He died on March 5, 1901, just short of his ninetieth birthday, and was buried in the Huntress Cemetery in Parsonsfield. His simple headstone is embellished with the Masonic emblem

of the ruler and compass - a symbol based on the building trades.

Thomas C. Huntress is representative of many now forgotten carpenter-designers who served the rural regions of the state and balanced their drafting talents with the realities of demand for their services and the need to provide sustenance for themselves and their families. In the survival of Huntress' drawings and his home, a rare insight is gained into the career of one of their number.

Thomas B. Johnson

NOTES

1. *Portland City Directory*, 1834. Huntress evidently worked at the Peters establishment for the next decade, as he is still listed as an employee there in the PCD for 1844.
2. York County Registry of Deeds (YCRD), Book 174, p. 13.
3. PCD 1846 lists Huntress as a joiner at N. Jackson's.
4. Houses similar to these were being built in many locations on the Portland peninsula throughout the 1840s. Surviving examples at 129-131 Park Street and 171-173 Danforth Street could have served as models for Huntress' drawings. Especially in the latter case, the facade and floor plan are almost identical to those in the Huntress drawings. However, no evidence has yet come to light linking Huntress with this building, and it must be assumed that he was copying rather than designing in this instance.
5. Huntress' drafting and mechanical drawing abilities were probably developed through free classes in these subjects sponsored by the Maine Charitable Mechanics Association, established in Portland in 1815. This institution provided lectures and classes for "...informing and cultivating the mind, and training up a race of

mechanics of sound moral principle and intellectual power...". Its library made available design manuals such as Asher Benjamin's and Minard Lafever's to those who took advantage of its resources. Unfortunately, no complete listing of Association students was kept, and it is impossible to directly link Huntress to classes held there. However, considering his residency in Portland during the 1830s and 40s along with his socio-economic standing in the community, it seems likely that his drawing talents would have been developed through this opportunity.

6. YCRD, Book 195, p. 74.
7. Huntress married Anne Hearn of Freedom, New Hampshire in 1853, and the couple had four children in the ensuing six years: George (1854), Melvin (1855), Flora (1857), and Idella Mary (1859).
8. *Maine Subscribers Directory*, 1861.
9. The drawings, now in the collection of the Maine Historic Preservation Commission, were acquired from a Huntress descendant living in Hiram, Maine in 1976.
10. The Fryeburg Church was designed by architect C. K. Kirby and built by Brownfield contractor Oliver S. Hurd. There is no evidence that Huntress had any connection to the design or building of this church, and one must surmise the drawings on recycled paper stock probably resulted from Huntress' admiration of the building on a visit to Fryeburg sometime after it was completed. His attraction to the edifice might well have stemmed from the fluted Doric columns used on the front of the church that echo some of his earlier drafting lessons copied from sources such as Asher Benjamin's design manuals. The drawings could also indicate an attempt to use the design as a possible source for the construction of churches in towns neighboring Parsonsfield.
11. YCRD, Book 223, p. 292, and Book 223, p. 290. The mortgage was extinguished the next year; see YCRD, Book 231, p. 355.
12. According to family and local tradition, the ell is a portion of another Huntress designed building that was moved to the site about 1870 and adapted as a series of connecting sheds and workrooms. Its original location is unknown.
13. YCRD, Book 359, p. 143.
14. YCRD, Book 417, p. 127.

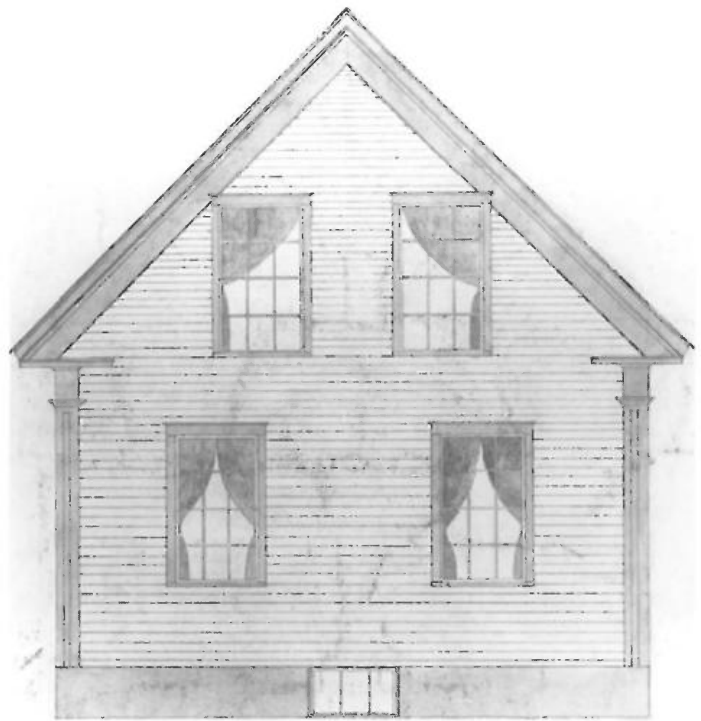


Figure 5. Side elevation drawing of the Thomas C. Huntress House, Parsonsfield by Huntress, 1852 (MHPC).

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY THOMAS C. HUNTRESS

Double House, 1846, unlocated.
 Double House, 1846, unlocated.
 Thomas C. Huntress House, Parsonsfield, 1852,
 extant.

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